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PERSECUTION OF THE AMBUR SKETE IN THE LETTERS OF ALEXANDER STEPANOVITCH PRUGAVIN

This work elucidates the little studied history of the persecution of the Ambur skete of Philipian Old Believers in 1879–1880. The article is based on the archive materials of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts and the State Archive of Archangelsk Region. This the first time that the authors have introduced the letters of the Old Believer A. I. Permyakov to the populist (*narodnik*) and researcher of Russian religious life, A. S. Prugavin. The letters reveal previously unknown details of the relations between the officials and the inhabitants of the Ambur skete at the time under consideration: the denunciation of a local priest to the Archangelsk police department; the resolution of the local authorities to destroy the skete cells; petitions of Permyakov and Prugavin to the governor of Archangelsk and petitions of the skete-dwellers to the governor's office and the minister of Internal Affairs on the unlawful persecutions of the skete; the sad outcome of the confrontation of the skete-dwellers and officials. The research elucidates the history of the Ambur skete, historiography of the subject and analyzes the official policy toward the Old Believers in the second half of the 19th century. On the basis of Permyakov's letters, the history of persecution of the skete-dwellers in 1879–1880 is given a detailed description along with the part Permyakov and Prugavin played in these events. They both were openly sympathetic to the Old Believers and tried to help them in every possible way. In particular, Prugavin published notes on the persecution of the Ambur skete in different periodicals while Permyakov patronized the community. The authors conclude that the repressive measures implemented against the Ambur skete-dwellers by the officials of the Arkhangelsk region reflected both the general repressive policy of the Russian government towards Old Believers and the vagueness of legislation on the issue of this religious group whose secrecy offered broad scope for the official injustice towards them in the province. Refs 17.

Keywords: Ambur skete, Old Belief, Russian North, A. S. Prugavin, A. I. Permyakov, Russian populism, persecution of Old Believers.

For citation: Sazhin B. B., Kuznetsova N. Yu. Persecution of the Ambur skete in the letters of Alexander Stepanovitch Prugavin. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History*, 2017, vol. 62, issue 4, pp. 807–816. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu02.2017.408>

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ГОНЕНИЯ НА АМБУРСКИЙ СКИТ В ПИСЬМАХ АЛЕКСАНДРА СТЕПАНОВИЧА ПРУГАВИНА

В данной статье подробно рассмотрена малоизученная в научной литературе история гонений на Амбурский скит староверов-филипповцев в 1879–1880 гг. Авторы основываются на архивных материалах Российского государственного архива литературы и искусства и Государственного архива Архангельской области, впервые вводят в научный оборот письма старообрядца А. И. Пермякова к народнику, исследователю религиозной жизни русского народа А. С. Пругавина.

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The research has been completed under the financial support of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science as a part of a state project assignment for research work, № 33.1162.2014/K.

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ну. Содержание писем раскрывает ранее неизвестные детали взаимоотношений властей и жителей Амбурского скита в рассматриваемый период: донос местного священника в Архангельское полицейское управление; постановление местных властей о сносе скитских келий; прошения А.И.Пермякова и А.С.Пругавина на имя архангельского губернатора; прошения скитников в канцелярию архангельского губернатора и министру внутренних дел о незаконности гонений на скит; печальный итог противостояния скитников и власти. В исследовании освещаются история Амбурского скита, историография темы, анализируется политика правительства в отношении старообрядчества во второй половине XIX в. На основе содержания писем А.И.Пермякова детально представлена история гонений на скитников в 1879–1880 гг., а также роль в этом противостоянии самого А.И.Пермякова и А.С.Пругавина. Оба они выражали свои симпатии старообрядцам и всячески пытались оказать им посильную помощь. В частности, А.С.Пругавин публиковал заметки, посвященные гонениям на Амбурский скит, в периодике, а Пермяков продолжал оставаться покровителем скита. Авторы приходят к выводу, что стеснительные меры, примененные архангельской губернской администрацией к жителям Амбурского скита, являлись отражением как общей репрессивной политики правительства Российской империи по отношению к старообрядцам, так и неопределенностью и неясностью законодательства, касавшегося вопроса о старообрядчестве, секретным его характером, открывавшим широкий простор для злоупотреблений властей в провинции. Библиогр. 17 назв.

Ключевые слова: Амбурский скит, старообрядчество, Русский Север, А.С.Пругавин, А.И.Пермяков, народничество, гонения на старообрядцев.

The Ambur Old Believer women's skete, one of the renowned Old Believer centres in the Russian North, known for its rigorous rule, has until now remained a rather mysterious place. The skete was "situated beyond the marshes of Rikasikha and Kudma, north of the tract from Dvina to the White sea, to Solza, Suzma, Nenoksa and further to the Unskaya bay" [Gemp, 1989, p. 42].

L. F. Dobrynin dates the foundation of the skete in this locality back to 1731, comparing the datings of the oldest coins found in this territory [Dobrynin 2013, p. 11]. The same dating of the foundation of the skete at 1730 is given by Rev. Sergiy (Mel'ko), who also points out that the skete was founded by the family of Khviuizov [Mel'ko 2006, p. 81–92]. E. F. Lutskovskaya emphasizes that the exact date has not been determined as yet but "the hermits have been settling around Ambur lakes 'since time immemorial'" and after the Solovetsk rebellion the remaining Solovetsk monks and toilers (*trudniki*) who concealed themselves here, founded the settlement [Lutskovskaya 2014, p. 189]. She bases her opinion on archival data. The work by V. Vitkov gives yet another date for the foundation of the skete, namely the first half of the 18th century [Vitkov 2004, p.9]. The authors consider the conclusion of E. F. Lutskovskaya to be the most justified and trustworthy.

Such type of monastic settlement as skete was popular within Old Belief. In the work of S. G. Wurgaft and I. A. Ushakov "Old Belief. Persons, Items, Events and Symbols. An Encyclopedic Dictionary", the term skete when applied to the priestless Old Believers is defined as "any secret community, in towns as well [...], at times without monks" [Wurgaft, Ushakov 1996, p. 260–261]. Referring to the experience of the Vygovsky community, the authors emphasize that Old Believers strongly differentiated the notions "skete" and "monastery". The former, usually, a small settlement near a monastery could be inhabited by people of both sexes, while the latter was a single-sex settlement. However, a skete usually emerged when "after an Old Believer monk settled in a cell in a forest, he was joined by new renunciates, sometimes with their families, so that gradually a skete and households were established" [Wurgaft, Ushakov 1996, p. 260–261]. For Old Believers the

general principles of skete life were solitude and producing all life necessities by themselves. Thus, in a skete, hard peasant toil was accompanied by strict adherence to rules and canons of monastic life. The Ambur skete must have appeared in the same manner.

By the 19th century the practice of living in a skete continued among Old Believers but the their conditions in the Russian North had altered, and the movement itself had changed crucially: female believers in sketes outnumbered males, with the average increase in age [Shikalov 2014, p.34–51; Ruzhinskaya 2009, p.33–40]. The Ambur skete seems to have consisted mostly of women in this period.

In the 19th century the relations between the authorities and Old Believers developed in a complicated way. In the time of Nikolai I, the prevailing legislative policy tended to tighten control over Old Belief to prevent “the schism” from spreading. For dwellers of skete settlements of grave importance were the following legislative acts: in 1826 a regulation prohibiting “any renovation or restoration of the old prayer house” was adopted (which was later included both in the Code of Laws of the Russian Empire and the Criminal Code); in 1839 a law was issued by which the nominal list of the new-born and deceased Old Believers of the skete (besides their total number) was managed by the local police who sent annual reports to the government [Ershova 1999, p. 122–123]. Besides, from 1841 the system “to observe the situation with the schism at the local levels” came into force. Local officials were obliged to use the power vested in them against any cases of stirring heresy or any other actions seemingly tempting or insulting the Church [Ershova 1999, p. 123]. As there were no fixed requirements for local officials of the kinds of actions they could or must take, the system opened broad scope for arbitrary behaviour towards Old believers. In 1853 the emperor approved a draft on measures against schismatics which permitted “the demolition of sketes without reserve” [Ershova 1999, p. 159–160]. This date marks the end of the Vygovsky community and sketes of Nizhniy Novgorod. Besides, Philippians who made up the majority of the inmates of the Ambur skete, were considered “the most harmful sect”, according to the classification of sects, presented by the attorney-general of the Synod, Count N. A. Protasov in 1841, on the request of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

In the second half of the century the situation somewhat changed. In February, 1864 a Special Interim Committee on Old Believers was established. Its purpose was to solve the issue of providing Old Believers with certain civil rights and freedoms to hold religious services. Consequently, on permission of the Minister of Internal Affairs Old Believers were “allowed to renovate shattered prayer houses, unseal those that were sealed in previous years, turn residential buildings into prayer houses, if needed” [Ershova 1999, p. 168–173]. In the 1870s the Commission of the Ministry of Internal Affairs classified this sect as less harmful. However, on the whole, settling all the issues concerning Old Believers remained subject to the interests of the established church. It should be noted that the uncertainty, vagueness and inconsistency of confessional policy of the government, therefore, facilitated the persecution of Old Believers.

The secret character of some of Nicholas I’s legislative enactments in force in the post-reform time were of special significance for the fate of Old Believers. For the dwellers of the Ambur “hermitage” an act that exerted negative influence on their lives was a Secret prescription of the Ministry of Internal Affairs № 245 of 1846, according to which everybody who settled in the skete in later years did so illegally and were to be evicted [Lutskovskaya 2009b, p. 54]. Prescription № 1034 of the governor of Archangelsk issued the same year required “demolishing the skete cells” which were left vacant after evicting

the “unlisted” skete-dwellers. Such was the effect of these secret statutes that the dwellers of the Ambur skete were driven into a major conflict with the officials in 1879 and 1880.

The populist A. S. Prugavin who made a stand for the oppressed Old Believers became a participant of the conflict. The writer got the first-hand information about the conflict when he visited the skete in 1879. In addition, he corresponded with other patrons of “the hermits”, Old Believers A. I. Permyakov and P. P. Seleninov. Moreover, the populist composed letters and petitions for the skete-dwellers.

The life of Alexander Stepanovich Prugavin, a historian, journalist and renowned researcher of Russian religious life, was connected with the Russian North for a long period time. He was born in Arkhangelsk in 1850. Prugavin's ancestors belonged to commoners of Arkhangelsk region but his father, S. B. Prugavin, having chosen pedagogical occupation, entered the high society of the region's centre. Thus, A. S. Prugavin's family, though belonged to the Russian intelligentsia, maintained close ties with the common folk and knew their life well. This was a situation typical of many populists of that time.

Prugavin's youth and the time when his socio-political views took its shape fell in the 1860s, a period of rising revolutionary democratic movement in Russia. In September 1869, he finished at the Arkhangelsk gymnasium and, to acquire a higher education, entered the Petrovskaya Agricultural Academy in Moscow where he immediately got involved in the students' movement. As a result, Prugavin got acquainted with M. A. Natanson and N. V. Tchaikovsky, members of the St. Petersburg populist circle, co-organized one of the students' secret societies and was even brought as a witness in the famous “Nechaev” case. At the same time, owing to the “Tchaikovsky” circle, he developed interest folk religious movements as protest against the state.

In 1871 for his active socio-political activity Prugavin was exiled to his homeland, the Arkhangelsk region, where he remained under covert police observation, first, living in Arkhangelsk itself and, then, in Shenkursk (from May, 1871). Less than a year later, in March, 1872, he was sent to Kem'. There Prugavin stayed until November and then was transferred back to Arkhangelsk in January, 1873. Later the populist was banished to the Voronezh region, and returned to his home town under police observation in August, 1877. In February, 1879, Prugavin was freed from police observation, and in September he came to Saint Petersburg.

Living in the North changed Prugavin's views on Old Belief [Kuznetsova, Pashkov 2016, p. 728–732]. While in Kem', the author stayed close to the Vygo-Leksinsk communion and the Topozersk skete, major centres of Philipian Old Believers in the European North. In his autobiography Prugavin mentions that “almost all the permanent population of the town was made up of priestless Old Believers” and that in Kem' he did not miss a chance “to get to know personally the representatives of different sects, [...], visit their sketes, study various manuscripts popular in their milieu” [Pashkov 2004, p. 339–357]. As early as at that time Prugavin might have been able to establish personal contacts with Old Believers and to discuss with them problems of their relations with officials. Throughout his life the populist did not lose touch (through correspondence, meetings and exchange of information) with the representatives of varied religious movements of the Empire. One of the brightest examples of such contacts is the episode of the Ambur skete persecutions.

Recently some new documents have been found in the Prugavin's personal archives in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RSALA), which allow to cast new light

on this episode of the history of the skete in the 19th century and Prugavin's part in this affair. File № 306 contains A. I. Permyakov's letters to Prugavin from September, 1879 till March, 1881 concerning persecutions of the Ambur skete [Alexander Ivanovich Permyakov's letters to Alexander Stepanovich Prugavin, l. 1–23].

The figure of Alexander Ivanovich Permyakov remains obscure and mysterious till now. The discovered documents and analysis of the information already available allow one to be sure only in the fact that Permyakov was a patron of the Ambur skete. A more detailed identification of his personality requires further study.

The conflict between the Old Believers of the Ambur skete and the officials began with the denunciation by the priest Shchekoldin on March 13, 1879 [Dobrynin 2013, p. 78–82]. In his letter to the Arkhangelsk police department, the rector of the Soloz parish reported that the skete had been fulminating and bolstering schim among Orthodox believers. The cleric also asked the police to help to evict people who were illegally living in the skete, to cease renovation of the dwellings and destroy spare cells [Dobrynin 2013, p. 78–79]. On March 23, in response to the denunciation, a district police officer arrived at the skete and “found 10 empty cells and sealed them” [Dobrynin 2013, p. 81–82]. During the spring and summer of 1879 the case of the Ambur skete was managed by the Arkhangelsk district administration and the Arkhangelsk regional government. The number of cells, skete-dwellers, and land owned by skete-dwellers were assessed. By the end of spring (30 May) it had been decided to destroy vacant cells, according to the law of 1846 [Prescription of Arkhangelsk regional government, l. 1–20]. Of note is the fact that in his letter the priest mentioned Permyakov as a person who was responsible for the illegal renovation of the skete cells.

At the beginning of November 1879 the newspaper “Week” published Prugavin's article “Sketes of Old Believers (on one particular case)”, in which he describes the case of the Ambur skete, according to its dwellers. The article contains details of the district police officer's sealing “empty” cells on March 23, followed by evicting some ill and elderly skete-dwellers from the skete (30 women and three men) who were forced afterwards to become beggars. The populist reveals a pretext for the denunciation of the priest: the renewed attack on the skete was provoked by the “hermits” refusal to present him with “gifts”, foodstuffs and “a quarter”, i.e. 25 rubles. Defending the Old Believers, the author emphasizes that the skete lived mainly on charity and more resembled an alms-house since the age of its dwellers was as much as 80–90 years. In other words, the writer proves that the sketes posed no danger at all for the government and puts a special stress on the fact that the Ambur skete was persecuted at the time of liberalization of legislation on Old Believers. Besides, the skete dwellers, as Prugavin states, were going to protest against the actions of the local police asking to unseal the cells and to allow the former dwellers to return [Prugavin 1879c, p. 1127–1131].

On October 2, 1879 Permyakov wrote his first letter to Prugavin from Arkhangelsk. In it he described the priest who was to blame for the Ambur skete's troubles with local officials. According to him, Shchekoldin was accused of stealing money and had been acquitted for a bribe. Permyakov mentions that the skete had already sent a petition asking to unseal the cells (probably, addressing it to the governor) and asks Prugavin if he saw it necessary to file another petition [Permyakov's letters, l. 1–106.]. Whether Permyakov composed the first petition all by himself, or he was assisted by Prugavin remains an open question.

On October 31 Permyakov writes another letter (Prugavin sent a reply to the previous one on October 18). On Prugavin's request, he gives more details of the incident with the money stolen by the priest Shchekoldin. Permyakov also asks Prugavin, who "knows everything about this case", to compose another petition on behalf of the skete (mentioning only M. N. Korelskaya, seemingly as the most respected skete-dweller) [Permyakov's letters, l. 2–3]. With it, Permyakov entrusts the choice of an addressee to Prugavin himself.

The draft of this petition to the Arkhangelsk governor is found in the populist's papers. It informs the head of the region of Shchekoldin's illegal actions: "not once did this priest approach the skete demanding money, tea or other food, and as his demands were neglected he decided to lodge a false denunciation with the authorities". The skete-dwellers prayed to protect them from "blame, abuse and persecution", give permission to unseal the cells, let the "decrepit and weak women" return there, and replace just a few boards on the roof of the skete chapel (prayer room), so that snow and rain would not wash away the wonderful faces of God's holy saints.

In November the police officer receives the second prescription from the Arkhangelsk district administration to demolish the cells in the Ambur skete [Prescription of the Arkhangelsk district administration, l. 4]. It can be concluded then that during the summer and two autumn months the first prescription to break the cells was not executed. It seems that the silence of the local authorities gave hope for possible improvements in the situation. This fact also encouraged Permyakov to write the second petition. In December the police officer was ordered to provide the Arkhangelsk district police department with lists of Old Believer sketes on the territory of the district with the exact number of dwellers and the number of both residential and non-residential premises [Prescription of the Arkhangelsk district administration, l. 5–6].

In December Permyakov wrote Prugavin two more letters. In the first he thanked Prugavin for sending him an article on the situation with the Ambur skete published in the newspaper "Week" (emphasizing that the police officer did not like the article), reminded him of the necessity to compose another petition "addressing the local police or the higher authority" and mentioned that according to rumours, after all, the cells would be taken down [Permyakov's letters, l. 4–4 об.]. In the second one Permyakov thanked Prugavin in many words for the article, which, in his opinion, was "just and timely", and conveyed the Old Believers' gratitude. Permyakov also described the reaction of the local authorities to Prugavin's article, wrote that he had heard the police captain say that the populist was accused of lying and was going "to be judged" [Permyakov's letters, l. 5–7 об.]. Permyakov confirmed that the cells had not yet been destroyed and consulted Prugavin about novelties in the legislation on Old Believers, asking "when and in what form the new rights to defend Old Believers would be issued". He addressed Prugavin again asking for help and assistance in unsealing the cells as soon as possible. On the whole, the correspondence between Prugavin and Permyakov reveals that by the end of 1879 the cells had not yet been demolished. Besides, it can be inferred from the letters that Permyakov was sure that the outcome of the conflict might be positive for Old Believers. Thus, he repeatedly pointed out that it would be good to unseal the cells and return the skete-dwellers before the adoption of the new legislation on Old Believers and wanted ("and would appreciate it much") those who had closed the houses and evicted the skete-dwellers to unseal the cells and return the inhabitants [Permyakov's letters, l. 5–7 об.].

In January 1880 an Arkhangelsk district police captain gives a written instruction to the police officer of the 2nd district to destroy the cells in schismatic sketes, including the Ambur skete [Prescription of the Arkhangelsk district administration, l. 8–806]. Besides, the nominal lists of the Pertozersk and Ambur sketes (composed on February 1, 1880) were given to the district police administration according to which the inhabitants of the skete were sixteen women (aged from 56 to 79 years), four men and three illegal dwellers (two women and a man aged 72–79 years) who probably had escaped the eviction in the spring [Prescription of the Arkhangelsk district administration, l. 9–11]. Strictly speaking, Prugavin's suggestion in the newspaper "Week" that the skete was more of an alms-house than anything else had strong grounds.

On February 5 Permyakov writes next (the 5th) letter to Prugavin [Permyakov's letters, l. 8–906] in which he confirms receiving the petition to the governor composed by Prugavin, and informs him of the result of the action: "It was submitted on January 28, 1880. He received it, read it and gave his resolution that he couldn't allow to unseal the cells and let the dwellers with passports back, the cells were to be destroyed. He couldn't give permission to renovate the prayer room either but would inquire the minister about it." The Arkhangelsk governor continued to abide by the secret decree of 1846, which Prugavin and Permyakov might have been unaware of. On the other hand, however, Permyakov mentioned in his letter that he had consulted several officials on the issue of the Ambur skete and the lodged petition, and got the answer that "the governor would either intervene with the decision or leave the petition as it was". He agreed that it seemed necessary to submit a petition to higher authorities, as Prugavin advised, to the minister of internal affairs or to Grand Prince Konstantin Nikolaevich and asked the populist to prepare new petitions.

Another Prugavin's note on the Ambur skete was published in the newspaper "Voice" in February 1880. On the whole this text was very close to the article for "Week", as the author described the skete-dwellers' struggle against the local authorities in the spring 1879, arguing that the skete was virtually an alms-house where "almost hundred year old women" lived out their last days rather than a centre spreading Old Belief. A new fact mentioned by Prugavin is that the petition was composed and sent to the office of the Arkhangelsk governor by the women of the skete in hope that "they would be allowed to unseal the cells and would get permission to get the evicted dwellers back" as well as to fix the chapel. The author describes the absurdity of the situation when the skete-dwellers "were not only made to pledge that they would not repair the roof of the prayer room" that was in a terrible state but were not even allowed "to replace 2 or 3 rotten boards". Prugavin puts a special stress on the good-natured, kind-hearted local Old Believers (despite himself belonging to Philippians) describing their help to the starving in 1867 [Prugavin 1880b, p. 3]. The appearance of this article aimed to attract the society's attention to the state of "the hermits" can be explained by the worsening situation with the Ambur skete.

Despite all the requests and petitions of the Old Believers the cells were demolished [Dobrynin 2013, p. 82]. As early as March Prugavin writes in "Voice" about the result of the conflict between the women skete-dwellers and the local officials stating that "on February 25 the district police officer with a village sergeant and 30 witnesses came to the skete. Nine cells were taken down. The district police officer ordered some of the old-women to get out of the skete. Their eviction was delayed until their recovery" [Prugavin 1880a, p. 3]. The persecutions of the skete-dwellers, according to Prugavin, must have been caused by

their relation to the Philippian agreement. However, the author again emphasizes their exceptional loyalty and great contribution of the Old Believers to the region.

Permyakov does not ignore the sorrowful outcome of the conflict between the women skete-dwellers and the officials. On March 4, 1880 he wrote Prugavin a sixth letter in which he gave a detailed description of how the cells had been demolished and told that “after the destruction a district police officer gave the women skete-dwellers one month to clear the territory up, with the remains of the cells to be used as firewood, adding that if they disobeyed, he would return and burn everything himself. The old women did not know what to do as they were too weak and did not have any tools” [Permyakov’s letters, l. 10–11]. Permyakov also shared with Prugavin his view on the further development of the situation pointing that they could not delay writing petitions to the higher authorities, that they should give the governor a new petition concerning repairing the prayer room. The author expresses other requests, namely, to renovate other skete cells, including the destroyed one, to allow returning people with passports to stay in the skete.

On March 21 Permyakov composed a new letter informing Prugavin of having received a petition addressed to the minister of internal affairs. He was waiting for a petition to the Grand Prince Konstantin Nikolaevich to send both of them. He wrote that the governor had already received the minister’s inquiry concerning the demolition of the cells in the Ambur skete [Permyakov’s letters, l. 12–12 o6.].

In April the district police officer received a prescription from the Arkhangelsk district police office which stated: “All the free cells are broken ... only those Old Believers and their children who settled there before 1846 live in the skete” [Prescription of Arkhangelsk district administration, l. 16–16o6]. The police officer was further prescribed to visit the skete personally and take measures against “anyone’s settling there and the premises being renovated”.

In May Permyakov writes Prugavin again thanking for the notes published in “Voice”, he stresses that he “had read the publication with pleasure” [Permyakov’s letters, l. 13–14 o6.]. It also follows from the letter that the Old Believers’ petition was sent to the minister of internal affairs, and Permyakov was anxious trying to learn what text the governor N. P. Ignatyev attached to the petition.

The situation with the petition to the minister found its outcome in the visit of the police officer to the Ambur skete on May 29 which fact was mentioned by Permyakov in his letter to Prugavin dated June 10. In the same letter Permyakov described the police officer’s visit to the skete, his threatening everyone who had signed the petition. The official declared that men, children of “institutionalized” skete-dwellers would be evicted or sent to the army, and that he would take Egor Korelskiy (M. N. Korelskaya’s son) as “his batman”. The policeman let the Old Believers know that whoever they might write petitions to, he and nobody else would come to the skete. In the end, the women skete-dwellers fearing the total eviction fell prostrate before the police officer and started apologising. Permyakov also mentioned that the police officer inquired about the author of the petition for the skete-dwellers (“they pointed at Permyakov”) and if Prugavin was in the skete (to what “the terrified old women answered negatively”) [Permyakov’s letters, l. 15–16 o6.]. Among some positive changes Permyakov mentioned that it had been allowed to renovate the prayer room (later it turned out that the governor had given no such order). He asked Prugavin for advice about what to do next and if it was worth lodging petitions somewhere else.

At the same time, in May 1880, the women skete-dwellers (in the person of the same M. N. Korelskaya) lodged petitions on renovating the prayer room and “shattered” cells of those Old Believers who lived there legally [Prescription of the Arkhangelsk district administration, l. 32–32 об., 33, 35–36].

Permyakov writes the next (the ninth) letter to Prugavin on July 29 [Permyakov's letters, l. 17–18]. Permyakov asks to inquire in the office about the result of their petition, tells that “the police officer promised to send the order to renovate the prayer room but it had not been received yet”. The author again asks Prugavin for advice about where to proceed in resolving the issue of the fate of the skete, suggests “that they should continue to act on the case, if quietly, through newspapers”.

Permyakov wrote the last (the tenth) letter mentioning the persecutions of the skete-dwellers in December 1880 [Permyakov's letters, l. 19]. In this letter he only thanked Prugavin for publishing an article about the police officer's actions in the Ambur skete on May 29 in a newspaper (the populist had sent it) but marked that he should not have mentioned his (Permyakov's) name.

No information on the conflict between the officials and the Ambur skete-dwellers could be found in Permyakov's letters after that, which is probably connected with the fact that on August 22 it was announced to the Old Believers that the minister of internal affairs had rejected to support their petition on renovating the prayer room and that the governor had forbidden to renovate the cells inhabited by the legal skete-dwellers. The documents with the official resolutions were signed by the Old Believers M. Korelskaya, V. Khviyuz, A. Makaryina [Prescription of the Arkhangelsk district administration, l. 36].

The full stop in the situation of the Ambur skete was made only at the end of the 1880s when on August 31, 1888, a decree of the Arkhangelsk region administration was issued to burn the remains of the destroyed cells as it was impossible to take them away, and on March 2, 1889, the district police officer reported that the remains of the cells had been burned [Dobrynin 2013, p. 82].

The conducted investigation of the conflict between the Old Believers of the Ambur skete and the officials in 1879–1880 allows to make the following conclusions. In the second half of the 19th century, despite some positive tendencies in the official legislation, the state of affairs with Old Believers in the Russian empire remained unsatisfactory in as concerns their rights and freedoms. The view on Old Belief as a religious phenomenon that does not have a right to exist persisted. The repressive policy towards adherents of the “ancient piety” was largely determined by the vague and uncertain character of legislative statutes, by a bureaucratic approach in decision-making, by the weight of former secret prescriptions and decrees which were still in force, but failed to go along the lines of the new post-reform tendencies.

The example of the Ambur skete-dwellers, priestless Philippians, clearly shows that a false denunciation was enough to trigger the repressive machine, and the Old Believers became absolutely defenceless in the face of the higher authorities and the arbitrariness of local police officers. Neither interference of intelligentsia (in this case, the populist Prugavin) in the conflict between the Old Believers and the officials, nor attempts to draw attention of a wider audience to the problem, could reverse the situation. This clearly shows that the issue of Old Belief in the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century remained extremely conflict-ridden, far from being resolved, with its believers devoid of civil rights, including the right to freely profess their religion.

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Received: 16.10.2016

Accepted: 20.11.2017